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ABSTRACT

The role of interaction and the importance of relationships with peers and significant others in the development of gifted adolescent girls' self-perceptions of ability are explored. Findings are based on a qualitative study which utilized participant-observation, interviewing, and artifact collection in one middle school. Ten girls (grades 6-8) were observed in the classroom and the gifted resource room. Data was continuously analyzed and relevant domains organized into taxonomies. The results of this study indicate that gifted girls use social interaction to determine the quality and acceptability of their achievements and to determine, through social competence, the extent of their abilities. Among conclusions drawn was that inadequate understandings of the components of giftedness caused teachers to communicate expectations perceived by the girls as confusing and unfair. (Author/CL)

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Social Interaction and Perceptions of Ability: A Study of Gifted Adolescent Females

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Abstract

The role of interaction and the importance of relationships with peers and significant others in the development of gifted adolescent girls' self-perceptions of ability are explored in this paper. Findings are based on a qualitative study which utilized participant-observation, interviewing, and artifact collection in one middle school. The results of this study indicate that gifted girls use social interaction to determine the quality and acceptability of their achievements and to determine, through social comparison, the extent of their abilities.

Social Interaction and

Perceptions of Ability: Gifted Adolescent Girls

The unique characteristics of gifted girls have recently received increasing attention in light of the literature which illustrates that, though one might expect a nearly equal number of male and female adults to be identified as gifted, this is not the case (Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962; Goertzel, et. al., 1978; Terman & Oden, 1959). "Even though gifted girls tend to earn higher grades in school and the prevailing stereotype of females includes superior performance in English, foreign languages, and the arts, the adult productivity of males is superior in all areas" (Callahan, 1981, p. 499). Why does this occur?

Though the research on gifted females is limited, a growing body of literature on obstacles to women's achievement stresses the importance of society's values toward men and women, and in particular, the role of early socialization (Callahan, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Rubovits, 1975; Stein & Bailey, 1973). Studies also indicate that school interactions may enforce these sex-role stereotypes. For example, in discussing the unique problems of gifted girls, Clark (1983) cited research which indicates that differential behavioral expectations and

teacher-student interactions serve to reinforce non-conforming behaviors in boys, often completely ignoring or reinforcing passive behaviors in girls . Horner (1972) suggested that internalized sex-role expectations may inhibit the female's motive to achieve by producing both a fear of failure as well as a fear of success. This motive to avoid success has been found to exist in high achieving adolescent girls who feel that success in school and competition between the sexes could bring undesirable consequences (Lavach & Lanier, 1975).

Since perceptions of ability are central to achievement motivation, this paper will concentrate on a description of the ability perceptions of gifted adolescent girls, and the role of social interaction in the development of these perceptions. Many educators have noted that issues of ability, achievement, social acceptance, and gender identity are sources of conflict for talented and gifted female adolescents (Fox, 1977; Horner, 1972; Rodenstein, Pfleger, & Colangelo, 1977), and that generally, when compared to the gifted male, the gifted female is less likely to realize her potential (Callahan, 1981). Brookover and Erickson (1975) referred to perception of ability as "a functionally limiting threshold condition. It functions to set limits on what we decide to do" (p. 275). This paper

describes and explains the school experiences of ten gifted adolescent females, delineating social-interactional factors which affect the formation of ability perceptions and activate attitudes toward achievement.

Methods

The study was conducted in a public middle school in a rural area in the Southeast. The school's 442-member population was housed in a modern, open-space building including 3 large team areas. Each team area contained heterogeneously grouped students in two grade levels: Team One, seventh and eighth graders; Team Two, sixth and seventh graders; and Team Three, fifth and sixth graders. Team areas were divided into four equal classrooms, one for each of the team's core teachers. The student population included 29 gifted students in grades six through eight, of whom ten were female. Using the state criteria of a 130 I.Q. score, these students were identified to participate in a gifted program which required their removal from the regular team area for special instruction one day per week.

The ten girls comprising the population of this study represented a range of I.Q. scores from 131-140. At the time of the study, five of the girls were eighth graders, two seventh

graders, and three were sixth graders. Eight of the girls had spent the majority of their school experience at the elementary and now the middle school in the same rural community, and seven of these had entered the gifted program on or before the third grade. With the exception of one student, all came from two parent homes in which the majority of mothers had equal or more formal education that the fathers, though in traditional fields such as teaching, nursing, or library sciences. The majority of mothers did not work full time.

In this study the researcher observed 200 hours of classroom activity over a five-month period from January to June of 1984. Observations were primarily conducted in only two team areas for none of the girls were members of Team Three. Observations were also conducted in the gifted resource room and in other areas of the school environment in which the girls interacted. These observations were conducted three days a week, usually on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The first and third weeks of observation were conducted only in the gifted room so that a smaller student population would enable the researcher to develop rapport with the participants at a faster pace. The second and fourth weeks consisted of descriptive observations in both teams. From the fifth week on, the researcher spent three

weeks following the girls in each grade level, one week in the gifted room, and a final week in general observations. Informal contact with the girls continued through the summer and into the winter of 1985, when preliminary findings were presented to the girls still in attendance at the middle school.

All observations of on-going behavior and verbal interactions were recorded in field notes and several gifted classes were also recorded on tape. In addition, formal interviews were conducted with the girls individually and in small groups, with team teachers, the school's principal, and mothers of five of the girls. These formal interviews were recorded in writing and on tape. Due to the open-space environment of the teams, informal interviews were conducted with ease throughout the study.

The data collected were analyzed using Spradley's Developmental Research Sequence (Spradley, 1980). This process requires that data be analyzed continuously to isolate relevant domains of language, behavior, objects, people, etc. Relevant domains are then organized into taxonomies. The construction of taxonomies enables the researcher to develop a cultural theme.

Theoretical Framework

Callahan (1981) noted that there are certain environmental

conditions which would seem to affect the motivation and achievement of gifted and talented females, but that these conditions are "perhaps untestable in the experimental tradition" (p. 502). Symbolic interactionism, however, provides a framework whereby human behavior can be explained through the discovery of the meanings or definitions humans assign to objects, activities, or individuals of interest within the environment. That is, because of the possession of a self, humans act toward or interpret things that confront them and organize their actions on the basis of that interpretation (Mead, 1934). This process of self-interaction enables people to deal with the world through a defining procedure which results in construction or generation of action rather than a mere release of action (Blumer, 1969). Observations and interviews from this study provide evidence that gifted girls interpret their abilities using : 1) definitions of giftedness held by significant others; 2) affiliation needs; and 3) social comparison.

Multiple Definitions of Giftedness

Implications concerning the sociological or affective effects of participating in enrichment programs on gifted

females cannot be drawn from existing research. Such programs have not been systematically studied (Callahan, 1981). However, data obtained in this study indicate that sociological effects on gifted females do exist in the form of labeling. The girls in this study expressed the belief that participation in a gifted program which entailed removal from their team areas one day per week made them the targets of confusing and often uncomfortable expectations from teachers and peers. The effects of labeling were no doubt compounded in this study by the small, rural environment the school served, and in which the girls had spent the majority of their lives, the small population of identified gifted students, and the open space team environment in which knowledge of peer status was easily made public.

The effects of labeling on gifted adolescent girls can be put into perspective by considering what we know about this stage of development. Experts acknowledge that early adolescence is a period when conflicts surface concerning identity formation and peer group membership (Lipsitz, 1977; Newman & Newman, 1976). Gilligan (1981) noted that, for girls, this is also a time when issues concerning acceptance and affiliation are important. That gifted adolescent girls differ from nongifted girls on fewer personality measures than gifted

and nongifted boys (Werner & Bachtold, 1969), that they are less well accepted by peers, and that they suffer from lower self esteem and insecurity (Kurtzman, 1967) may result from conflicts between the desire to belong and the separating label of giftedness.

> We would join Kurtzman in his admonition that educators today evaluate their attitudes and behavior toward the gifted girls in the school system. In providing special education programs for the gifted we might unwittingly increase the conflict between sex-role expectations (and the emsuing pressure to conform) and the push toward independent thinking (and competition) for gifted girls without giving them an opportunity to be aware of and emotionally prepared for the ambiguous attitudes of the society in which they are growing up. (Werner & Bachtold, 1969, p. 181)

Observations and interviews from this study illustrate the unique conflict gifted adolescent girls experience concerning their identity as gifted, and their need to be accepted and belong within the school culture. Describing themselves as much more sensitive than boys, the gifted girls in this study were, themselves, consciously aware of constructing their behavior in ways which would help them "fit in". Their attempts were not always successful, however, as portrayed in the following example.

> Students in biology are beginning an experiment to determine if a substance is an acid or base. They organize themselves at lab tables in almost exactly the

order they had previously sat. This makes Sally and Lynn, two gifted girls, lab partners. The researcher drifts over and sits with Sally, Lynn, and two other girls.

> Sally: (To the researcher) You should have seen Lynn's face when you walked into history.
> Researcher: Why? What happened?
> Sally: We were acting bad. (She grins.)
> Sally and Lynn begin playfully arguing over lab materials, pushing and laughing.
> Girl 1: Yeah! Look how immature they act.
> Girl 2: And you're suppose to be gifted!
> Lynn: (angrily) And you're suppose to be dumb!
> Sally: Yeah! (moving behind Lynn) What's your definition of gifted, anyhow?
> Though the teacher overhears this and catches the researcher's eye, he makes no effort to intervene. A brief silence is followed by preparation for the lab.

Data obtained in this study indicate that teachers conceptualized giftedness and gifted behavior in a variety of ways, but that these conceptions did not always match the characteristics of students who were identified by state criteria as gifted. This mismatch between teachers' ideas about giftedness and the characteristics they attributed to the school's gifted population was most apparent to teachers when they spoke about gifted girls. Perhaps because teachers found this discrepancy to be difficult to resolve and their behavior reflected this dilemma, gifted girls perceived themselves to be frequently placed in situations in which their competency was questioned.

When, during group interviews, the girls were asked about

abilities that related to being gifted, they often used conflict-producing situations to explain their perceptions. It appeared to the girls that teachers defined their giftedness in ways that made them more apt to fail in school situations. Consequently, they felt confused and frustrated.

> Lynn: The only reason we got in there (gifted program) is because we are more capable. . .
> Ellen: We were smart when we were tested.
> Lynn: Because we're capable of doing more than we are but we don't do it.
> Researcher: What makes you not do it?
> Several girls try to speak at once, but Lynn interrupts.
> Lynn: (Excitedly) It's hard! It's really hard for us! It makes it harder for us than other students because they (teachers) expect us to know more!
> Sally: They'll be explaining something and they'll ask an enrichment student a question, but we won't know how to do it. We've never seen it before, but they expect us to!
> Debbie: Especially one teacher! He'll be explaining something and then he'll ask a gifted student a question, but they won't know it. He'll say, "Well, you're supposed to know it. You're in gifted."
> Sally: How are we suppose to know the stuff before we are suppose to? It makes it harder for us.
> Ellen: Yeah. They think we're so. . . You know. . . (Her voice trails off.)

Teacher's beliefs about what constitutes giftedness and how this compared with the characteristics of identified gifted girls were illustrated most clearly when teachers compared the gifted girls with girls they considered bright. Bright girls were characterized by teachers as more motivated, more enthusiastic,

and more verbal in the classroom than were the gifted girls. For example, one science teacher noted that high achieving girls were more academically inclined than gifted girls. Though teachers expressed an awareness that gifted girls' behavior might result from a desire to avoid standing out, the consensus was that these girls behaved "just like all little girls growing up", with the possible exception of the more motivated, bright girls. The difference between gifted and nongifted girls was perceived by teachers to be far less than the difference between gifted and nongifted boys.

Analysis of classroom interaction in this study revealed that gifted girls very rarely volunteered to answer questions or make comments during their regular classes. In addition, when students had the option of selecting seats, they most often sat in the rear of the room where the possibility of interaction with the teacher was minimized. The fear of being singled out and failing to know the answer was especially intense for these girls when the class was one in which they perceived themselves to be most able, when the teacher was one the student especially liked, or when a situation involving direct competition was occurring. For example, two of the girls described the following situation during an interview.

Cindy: I get so sick of it. It happened yesterday when we were playing a game to review for the test. When the team gets in a tight spot they say, "Ask Cindy! Ask Cindy! She'll know! I got really mad. Even my best friends do it.
Nancy: (Looking at Cindy) Yeah, but did you see me go up there? I knew the answer, but I wasn't going up there. Not even for the team.
Cindy: I've asked them not to do that. It's embarrassing to me. Now what if I got up there and it happened to be a question I didn't know? It'd make me look worse. I don't want to look like a brain!
Nancy: (To the researcher) She's normal.

The discrepancy between the behaviors of girls identified as gifted and girls who appeared bright to the teachers frequently led teachers to express concern about the construct of giftedness. As one teacher explained, "My definition is that on Wednesdays and Fridays I'm missing a certain number of students. That's the only thing I know. They have to make up the work." Other teacher definitions of giftedness fell into three categories: 1) references to the 130 score on an I.Q. test; 2) descriptions of students as productive workers achieving their potential; and 3) descriptions of cognitive abilities which enabled students to think deeper, perceive more, and see relationships between things that didn't normally go together. Teachers using the second and third definitions tended to name only one or two of the gifted girls who fit these definitions. The consensus was that teachers could not tell if the majority of identified girls were gifted. When asked if their beliefs about

giftedness might influence their interactions with the students, teachers indicated that they were not aware this ever happened, or that strict curriculum requirements and the limitations of open space did not permit them to treat gifted students differently.

> Teacher A: I talk to them the way I talk to other students. I don't mention their giftedness. Maybe they think I do because I expect them to work up to their ability.
>
> Teacher B: I talk to them like adults. If it's a difficult job I tell them they can do it because they're smarter than the average bear. They react well to this.
>
> Teacher C: Gifted doesn't correlate with production. Not at this age. Our curriculum doesn't lend itself to the gifted so I find it hard to provide for them.

Further insight was provided by a resource teacher who was informally interviewed during a teacher work day.

> Researcher: I'm curious about how the school perceives these girls.
> Teacher: We. . . um. . . sound real negative, and that's not good. I think something needs to be done about teacher attitudes. I think teachers expect more because they're gifted and it could be because we really don't know what gifted is. I wonder if, because they're taken out of classes more, given special privileges , and allowed to do more, there isn't somewhat of a grudge. Ask around and listen to what teachers say. You'll probably hear teachers say, "I really don't know how so and so got in. They're really dumb."

The importance of teachers' definitions of student ability in shaping student behavior has been hypothesized as the self-fulfilling prophecy. A growing body of research indicates that what teachers think and believe can influence student performance through differential treatment (Braun, 1976; Brophy & Good, 1970; Cooper, 1979; Jeter, 1975). The data obtained in this study indicate that teachers' inadequate understanding of giftedness contributed to expectations which gifted girls were frequently unable to fulfill, thus publicly questioning their competence. The girls expressed the desire to avoid these expectations, and those of peers, by modifying their behavior in order to "fit in". Evidence of the girls' confusion concerning the abilities implied by their gifted label can be seen in their frequent admission that, while they might have potential, they were no different and no smarter than other girls.

Affiliation needs

The questions which emerged during the early stages of data collection and analysis for this study were: What things cause these gifted girls concern or anxiety? What makes them happy or gives them a sense of accomplishment? The answers to these questions led the researcher to focus on the importance of relationships in assessing one's ability. The girls in this

study expressed beliefs that being liked by their teachers enabled them to do better in class. In addition, they believed that being liked by their peers, or being socially competent, was an important area of achievement.

To provide a framework for understanding the role of affiliation in gifted girls' perceptions about their own abilities, it is helpful to discuss current views of achievement motivation in females. In separate reviews, both Hoffman (1975) and Rubovits (1975) cited research findings which indicate that girls are taught to value achievement as a means of obtaining approval, and that affiliation is a primary activator of achievement related behavior. Rubovits (1975) noted that "girls who engage in the most achievement activity are those who are most concerned with affiliation and approval" (p.26). However, Stein and Bailey (1975), in their review of achievement motivation in females, cited many of the same research studies but concluded that such research has been misinterpreted. "We propose instead that females <u>are</u> motivated to achieve, but that the areas of their achievement are sometimes different from males" (p. 152). Stein and Bailey suggested that females resolve the conflict between achievement motive and femininity by defining achievement as social acceptability and skill.

In delineating the factors which cause gifted adolescent girls anxiety, or which bring them a sense of accomplishment, the data analysis indicates that the girls in this study believed that affiliation (being liked) was a means to greater achievement. That is, on numerous occasions they expressed the belief that if a teacher liked you, you were more apt to do well. This finding contradicts the assertion that affiliation is, itself, an end, purposing instead that the girls in this study perceived affiliation as a means to an end.

The belief that being liked made achievement more likely indicates that relationships with teachers had great impact on gifted girls' self-perceptions of ability. The following statements are examples from the domain, Ways to Know if a Teacher Likes/Doesn't Like You:

1. If a teacher likes you, your work will probably be put up in the room.
2. You can almost feel who is high (popular) in the team because if a teacher likes you, you get to do a lot and you do well.
3. If a teacher doesn't like your work you feel like they were giving you that grade because they don't like you.
4. My grades are falling because of the teachers. . . and I guess because of me. We don't get along.

The girls frequently spoke about "getting reputations" with teachers and how a good reputation affected the way you behaved in class. Cindy, a gifted girl most often referred to by

teachers as a producer, described for the researcher a series of steps she took during the first weeks of school to make a good impression. The steps included trying hard, answering a lot of questions, being polite, and not hanging around students who caused problems. "I make a good impression and they'll remember it unless I do something really bad to change it. Then I stop answering questions except once in a while so they still know I'm trying." For Cindy, being liked by the teacher was important not only for approval reasons, but also because, once she gained the reputation, she believed she could "stay on the teacher's good side" even though her participation in class became minimal.

In contrast, Nancy, a new student at the school, described getting a reputation as having teachers "know you a long time and like your mother." Interviews with Nancy and observations of her school experiences provided rich descriptions of what occurred when the teacher didn't like you. It is important to note that Nancy's classroom behavior was the most deviant of all the gifted girls. It was difficult for her to sit still, she frequently broke rules, when she worked during class it was on assignments related to other classes, and she often failed to do homework assignments. The ramifications of gaining a reputation based on this behavior were most apparent when, sitting in the teachers'

lounge, the researcher heard Nancy's teachers discuss her behavior as very "sneaky and dishonest". A resource teacher listening to the conversation commented, "Wait till I get her next term. I'll whip her into shape!" During the course of the researcher's observations, Nancy's behavior grew steadily worse in her teachers' eyes, despite numerous parental attempts to remedy the situation. A comment made to the researcher by one teacher drew an interesting comparison between behaviors which had gained Nancy a reputation as dishonest, and similar behaviors among gifted boys.

> Teacher: I have trouble looking at these gifted girls as being gifted. Now, Nancy maybe. I can't associate with her because she's new and I've only known her awhile, but I've known the others for years. Also because of her behavior. Her behavior isn't antisocial like the gifted boys' behavior. It's dishonest . When James (gifted boy) doesn't do his homework, it's because he sees no reason. Because he knows it. Nancy tells me she did it, but it got lost. . . . The majority of girls are more interested in pleasing and doing well because it pleases the teacher.

Beyond drawing a distinction between this teacher's perception of the same behavior (not doing the work) acted out by a gifted boy and Nancy, this comment illustrates two additional points. First, it should be noted that the teacher is reaffirming the girls' beliefs that reputations do exist and are based on long term relationships. Second, Nancy's behavior, though seemingly

dishonest, was an attempt to please the teacher by stressing the effort, rather than ability, that she perceived teachers rewarded in girls.

It is interesting to note that Nancy described having feelings of guilt and confusion about her ability and motivation to do schoolwork. She informed the researcher that teachers did not really listen to her and that she believed they were making things up about her. The researcher's observations that Nancy's usual peer group composed of gifted and high achieving girls interacted with her less and less frequently over the duration of the study were explained by Cindy. "She (Nancy) is getting a bad reputation with teachers."

The relationship between gifted girls' self-perceptions of ability and their affiliation needs is illustrated by their belief that being liked made success more likely. In addition, the girls explained that they usually liked teachers who liked them, and that liking the teacher also meant that you had a better chance of doing well. When asked to give an example of this relationship, the majority of gifted girls in this study indicated that liking the teacher meant liking the subject, and if you liked the subject you would listen more and try harder. Only one eighth grade girl disagreed with this idea. "Everyone

has a best subject and mine is English. I doubt I would do better in any of my classes, even if I liked the teachers."

The significance of the girls' belief that liking a subject meant they were more apt to do well was clearly illustrated when the majority of eighth grade gifted girls declined to register for several honors classes which were being offered at the local high school the following year. In addition to desiring to be with peers not taking honors, the girls expressed the concerns that honors classes just meant more homework and that if they weren't interested they wouldn't be able to keep up with the class. Their belief that liking a subject would be a determining factor in their ability to do well surfaced after a teacher made the following announcement in a team meeting.

> Teacher: Once you write down your schedule you can't change it. The high school has asked us to tell you this so make your decision with your parents carefully. What your teachers recommend isn't set in stone, but what you write down you can't change. Don't decide you are going to try something out! It doesn't work that way! (An example of honors science or regular science is given.)

When the researcher ask another teacher if this policy might keep a gifted girl who didn't like science now from taking further science courses, the teacher replied, "If she didn't like the subject, why take it? This decision came out of the team teachers meeting. If they don't like it, they probably won't

work at it. If it's just an ego trip they shouldn't take it."

Feelings of social competence were a second area in which the gifted girls in this study expressed a relationship between affiliation needs and perceptions of ability. In a study of girls' perceptions of schooling, Lomax (1978) concluded that "peer relationships were the most prominent feature"(p.122). Data obtained from observations and interviews during this study support Lomax's assertion, and reveal that in subtle ways teachers in this middle school influenced those peer relationships.

Team teachers' classroom interaction with gifted boys was a significant factor in the way gifted girls valued and described their own social competence. This first became apparent during early observations when analysis of the data revealed that teachers using public sarcasm or ridicule often directed it at the same boys. One sixth grade boy and three seventh grade boys, all gifted, were primary targets of this public criticism. When asked why these same boys were so frequently disciplined, the girls explained that the boys were trying to show off being smarter than everyone else and that they were just "nerds." The girls believed that the behavior exhibited by gifted boys was behavior to be avoided. "They make it hard for us. Outside

people think you must be weird if you're in gifted." When pressed to describe the behaviors that made the gifted boys seem socially inept to other students, the majority of girls listed: arguing with the teacher, thinking you are smarter, and always knowing the answer. Such behaviors, in addition to their perceptions of gifted boys as being physically unattractive, made the girls even more concerned with avoiding the label of gifted in order to "fit in". This was also true of eighth grade girls who frequently pointed out the lack of social competence in the gifted boys. Though eighth grade boys were rarely singled out as behavior problems, they were frequently ahead of everyone else in schoolwork, and as such, exhibited the behaviors the girls thought should be avoided. The following examples illustrate the girls' belief that social competence was a valued skill or ability.

> Jill: Some people in gifted think they are smarter than anyone and that they can get away with anything. . . like Bobby and John and David. I know they are smart, but they act smarter than everyone, and people in regular classes just think everyone is equal.
> Marie: The boys act out. Miss Davis always gets mad at Bobby.
>
> Nancy: (Running into the gifted room out of breath) I had to run all the way here so I wouldn't be seen walking with him (a gifted boy).

Debbie: I hate math. No one knows what he (teacher) is talking about except the real brains.
Researcher: Who are the real brains?
Debbie: Phil and Steve and Jason (Two of these boys are gifted.) They'll be the only ones participating. You see, they've had calculus and all that, and they're already finished with our science book. She lets them go ahead and just read it, and they passed all the tests.
Researcher: Why don't you do that?
Connie: (Laughing) We aren't that smart!
Debbie: The gifted girls are a lot different from the gifted guys. We don't want to be different. They don't care if they are. We don't want to be odd. Look at them! Do you see the way they are?
Connie: They're like the bottom of the barrel. They're really low. The way they dress! (She grimaces.) They're strange.

The open-space environment of the teams made it easy for the researcher to document the frequent occasions when gifted boys were publicly reprimanded. It should be noted that this ease of observation was true for all students and teachers in the team area. On one occasion, the researcher, observing in one class, overheard a teacher at the opposite end of the team area instruct her students, "Raise your hands, but not like Mr. Burton (gifted boy) who raises his hand like this (She waves hers in the air.) and yells, 'Miss Martin! Miss Martin!'" When the researcher asked a student sitting nearby how Bobby (Burton) must feel, the student indicated that Bobby was always in trouble.

In summary, the girls in this study perceived affiliation as a means to an end. They perceived that being liked by teachers

was an indication that their chances of doing well would be greater. Being liked by peers was an indication of valued social status. Being liked by teachers and being socially competent were measures the gifted girls in this study used to assess their abilities.

Social Comparison

Both Hoffman (1975) and Rubovits (1975) noted that girls do not recognize their own strengths, and in particular, bright girls generally underestimate their own abilities. This assertion is also made by experts in gifted education (Khatena, 1982). The findings of this study indicate that gifted adolescent girls do underestimate their abilities in the process of determining the value of these abilities. Field notes and interview transcripts reveal numerous examples of gifted girls' use of social comparison to describe their abilities in terms of: 1) the potential for specific abilities to contribute to greater social competence both at present and in the future, and 2) the amount of effort they believed they had to expend in order to achieve on a level commensurate with that of the gifted boys.

Covington (1984) noted that "a central part of all classroom achievement is the need for students to protect their sense of worth or personal value" (p.5). The girls' sensitivity to

others' perceptions and expectations, their belief that affiliation enabled them to have greater success, and their value of social competence have been stressed throughout this paper. Data from this study indicate that these constructs were central to the girls' sense of worth. That is, perceptions of their abilities were influenced by decisions these girls made regarding the worth of their abilities. These decisions were made through a process of social comparison. The following examples illustrate how the value of having abilities affected ability perceptions both in the present and the future.

> Researcher: I hear you are an excellent singer.
> Ellen: No. Not really. Not excellent.
> Researcher: Miss Hunt (teacher) told me you sing well.
> Ellen: When I was in fifth or sixth grade I had a lot of nerve. See, I didn't care what people thought of me then, because. . . I don't know. But when I was in fifth grade I sang Tomorrow in front of the whole school. And if I had any way of changing it I would, because even if I sang OK, now people think I'm straight. . . .
> Researcher: Because of the song?
> Ellen: I guess being up there by myself, people think it's weird. The boys think so. . . . I think I'd rather have friends and things than really be that good. . . 'cause it doesn't do anything for me if I sing.

> Cindy: A lot of ladies think. . . well, a lot of ladies are. . . as good as men and some are better, but I just believe God put men on earth first and they should take care of ladies. She should do as well as she can.
> Nancy: Man provides for women. That's what the Bible says.

Cindy: If I apply for a job when I'm older and a man gets it, I'm not going to think he did just because he's a man.
Researcher: What would happen if you knew you were the better person for the job?
Cindy: Well, I guess I would just have to try somewhere else.

The value of having abilities was at the root of frequent unsolicited comments made to the researcher about gifted boys. Their perceptions of gifted boys as "real brains" and as socially incompetent led them to compare the two constructs as mutually inclusive. Being smart enough to gain reputations with teachers, but not so smart as to lose social standing by behaving like one was a "real brain", presented a continuing value dilemma. The girls' resolution of this conflict was to stress that anyone could be as smart as them. Jill's comments that, "I only do well if I study. Otherwise, I don't know the answers. I don't know the answers when he asked about what we read.", are similar to comments made by all the girls with the exception of Nancy. Nancy believed she could be smart without doing work, but she was unsure of how to "do well".

The girls' perceptions that the cause of their achievement was rooted in effort rather than ability is of central importance. In a review of research, Covington (1984) noted, "It is only after students enter junior high that effort is

progressively devalued and becomes a source of threat to one's worth"(p.10). How does this occur? The phenomenon of ability formation as a process of social construction is argued by Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984). Data from this study support this idea. Gifted girls tended to compare their abilities with those of gifted boys, using perceptions of effort as a measuring device. As Lynn explained, "Tom and Bob don't have to try as hard. Their whole life is brains. . . . They talk in scientific notation!" The result of comparison based on perceptions of effort was a tendency for gifted girls to underestimate, and in fact, devalue their ability. Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) noted that a turning point occurs in the process students use to interpret their abilities. That is, when students no longer perceive effort as a path to higher ability, effort becomes synonymous with hard work, and as such, a sign of low ability.

It is interesting to note that those girls least able to "gain an appropriate reputation" with teachers most frequently blamed a lack of effort for their difficulties. These girls expressed a desire to perform and confusion over their low levels of motivation. As Ellen explained, "I try and yeah, I know I could do better. I try and I guess it's the best I can do."

That Ellen never noticed the contradiction in her statements is illustrative of her confusion.

In summary, the gifted girls in this study assessed their abilities in terms of the value they perceived that others attributed to their abilities. Secondly, they compared their abilities with those of gifted boys in terms of effort. These girls tended to describe themselves as hard workers and gifted boys as "real brains".

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study was to describe gifted adolescent girls' self-perceptions of ability and achievement within the context of one middle school setting. The naturalistic methodology used enabled the researcher to look closely at the interactive nature of learning in schools, concentrating on the perceptions of gifted girls. As such, the findings of this study are not generalizable to all gifted adolescent girls, but are descriptions intended to improve the understanding of beliefs gifted girls have about themselves and the factors which affect the formation of these beliefs. As Wolcott (1976) noted, "the ethnographer's unique contribution is this commitment to understand and convey how it is to 'walk in someone else's shoes' and to tell it like it is'" (p.25).

Research has portrayed early adolescence as an age crucial to the healthy and productive functioning of individuals in later life, yet at present our understanding of this age is inadequate (Lipsitz, 1977). Naturalistic techniques offer researchers promising alternatives for conceptualizing the stresses and anxieties characteristic of this age, and in particular, gifted girls. "There have been few studies from the point of view of the learner" (Meighan, 1978, p.91), and rarely have these studies been conducted for descriptive purposes (Weinstein, 1983). The role of social interaction in mediating the stresses and anxieties particular to early adolescents has equally gone unexplored, though researchers have noted the importance of social comparison in the formation of ability perceptions at this age (Covington, 1984; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984).

The following conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study.

1. The inadequate understanding of the components of giftedness caused teachers to communicate expectations which were perceived as confusing and unfair by the girls.

2. The girls believed that being liked by teachers ensured them a better chance of success. Additionally, gaining a positive reputation with teachers was perceived as a wya to avoid

potential uncomfortable situations by avoiding the necessity of publicly demonstrating knowledge. That is, the girls believed that displaying appropriate behaviors kept teachers from requiring public performance.

3. The girls perceived social competence as an area in which demonstrated ability was valued. In order to achieve social competence it was important to fit in and not behave as if you believed you were smarter than others.

4. Social comparison was used to determine the value of abilities. If ability was perceived as having little value, the girls did not express high estimations of themselves in regard to the ability.

5. The girls believed that their achievements were due to effort, while gifted boys were perceived as being intelligent due to ability. The one student who believed her abilities were not related to effort was least able to do well and most negatively perceived by teachers.

Clark (1983) noted that during the next ten years questions which are presently surfacing concerning females' achievement-related behaviors and the importance of social relationships will provide promising areas of research. Until more is known, the findings of this study suggest the importance

of the following strategies in the education of gifted girls.

1. Activities which enable gifted girls to interact with female role models who present the image of being successful both professionally and socially are needed.

2. Activities which encourage girls to set personal goals and provide concrete, problem-solving techniques for reaching goals should be implemented.

3. Regular and individual interaction with adults who are talented in areas in which girls express ability or interest should be provided. Such mentors may fill the need gifted girls feel for affiliation, providing support and encouraging achievement motivation.

4. Activities should be provided which allow girls to investigate a wide range of career options in a warm and supportive environment.

The findings of this study support the premise that gifted and talented females suffer from conflict brought on by issues of achievement and social acceptance (Horner, 1972). Further research which enables us to develop strategies to help gifted adolescent females deal with these anxieties is needed before we can expect young females to realize their potential.

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